"The Absolute Genre"

The Year in France

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The field of biography in France elicits a notable degree of reflection on genre, which is expressed either implicitly, by the prolixity and diversity of sometimes experimental productions, or explicitly in at least two books published in 2019 with very different, if not radically opposite, approaches to the question: Pascal Quignard's *La vie n'est pas une biographie* and Dominique Bona's *Mes vies secrètes*. Quignard's argument against "biographical narration" is that "On ne saurait faire un tissu si continu de ses désirs, ni des actions où ils se projettent ou qu'ils inventent, qu'il puisse passer pour vraisemblable" [One cannot make of one's desires, or of the actions into which they project themselves or which they invent, a fabric so continuous as to pass for verisimilar] (21). On the whole, Quignard is repeating the argument presented by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1986 essay "The Biographical Illusion." Furthermore, in Quignard's view, "Les rêves sont encore vivants, non les phrases" [Dreams are still alive, sentences are not] (20). Such a statement, as well as the affirmation of a "being" that would be different from "life," implies a surprising rejection of both psychoanalysis and the philosophy of deconstruction, which, to be convincing, would demand a much more serious philosophical effort than this.

A great number of the most noteworthy biographical productions in France this year run against the grain of Quignard's thesis. Chief among them, Bona's *Mes vies secrètes* is an autobiography of a prominent woman biographer, in which she explains how she came to opt for life writing against the advice of her mentors, and her plaidoyer for biography expresses a radically different vision of the genre. For Bona, inasmuch as it is a work of literature, biographical writing at its best is not primarily a mimetic, but a hermeneutic process, by which the writer and readers together seek to imagine, over and beyond mere words, what it must have been like to live such a life. Conversely, because we are born and live in worlds that are always already inhabited by previously created forms, there is great insight in Oscar Wilde's apothegm: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (39).

Likewise, Denis Demonpion argues that Michel Houellebecq composes his life like a novel in the new and augmented version of his 2005 biography,

Houellebecq: La biographie d'un phénomène. The novelist has abundantly spread lies about the facts of his own life, but he also cultivates ambiguity between his fictional characters and himself, between his narrators and his own figure as implied author. This very ambiguity is a crucial ingredient of his *succès de scandale*, for Houellebecq is a satirist, more Juvenalian than Horacian, always aiming to press where it hurts to denounce what he sees as the vices and errors of a French society far gone, in his eyes, on the road of inexorable decadence. No wonder he has more detractors than admirers in his own country.

Jean-Marie Gleize's *Denis Roche: éloge de la véhémence* is certainly more significant in the debate implicitly raised by Quignard's *La vie n'est pas une biographie*, for Roche paradoxically seems to give credence to Quignard and to prove him wrong at the same time. Having all but proclaimed the death of poetry in *La Poésie est inadmissible*, Roche had this "vehemence" that also made him shift constantly from one genre to the other, and from literature to photography and back, as if he was permanently fretting lest he might get trapped in the discursiveness of one artistic form. A comparable example may be found in the figure of the Dadaist writer Jacques Rigaut, whose integral nihilism led him to put an end to his own life at the age of thirty-one. Jean-Luc Bitton's biography, *Jacques Rigaut: le suicidé magnifique*, is the kind that Rigaut himself wouldn't have liked, because it is too long. And indeed, Rigaut's life was one long self-abandonment to the death wish, with a final leap into the blank inarticulateness of romantic sleep.

Worlds apart from the publications mentioned so far, Charly Delwart's *Databiographie* would tend to support Quignard's view that "biographic narration" is essentially unable to render the essence of any life. Delwart has attempted, he says, to write a biography of himself up to the age of forty-four through figures, or data, "which in Latin means things given," he explains in a video interview. Delwart investigates his own life from various angles through "ratios": what living space he could have bought in different cities with the money he spent on psychoanalysis; what duration of physical contact with his parents he had yearly at various ages; how many spermatozoa he has released; how many times he has tidied up his children's rooms himself, how many times they have, etc. The result is a series of 150 graphs or charts, with commentaries in footnotes, and a second part in which his publisher has asked him to "back these figures with anecdotes to put some flesh on these arid data." Delwart certainly conveys very little of this ineffable dimension of life that Quignard says biography is bound to miss. On the contrary, the content of this book, text and illustrations, fends off any deeper quest for truth as it remains obdurately on the surface of things.

Through a much more artfully successful combination of text and image, writing and drawing, Frédéric Pajak is perhaps the greatest revelation of the year. He came into the limelight when he won the Prix Goncourt de la Biographie 2019 for his *Manifeste Incertain 7, Emily Dickinson, Marina Tsvetaieva, l'immense poésie*. Pajak has already published eight volumes of what he has identified as a series of nine, under this oxymoronic title, *Manifeste Incertain*, that expresses all at once the

accepted impossibility of recapturing any life, the author's uncertainty in the face of all ideological discourses, and the fundamental generic hybridity of his books, hesitating on almost every page on the discrepancy between the black-and-white drawings and the poetic texts under them. Here is a very successful mode of graphic biography. Far from aiming at being exhaustive, on the contrary Pajak concentrates on details that he finds particularly meaningful to capture the spirit of his subjects. From Plutarch he retains both the importance of details and the method of parallel lives: Emily Dickinson and Marina Tsvetaeva never met, and the iconographic-cum-scriptural text oscillates from the one to the other, the pictures affording space, as Pajak sees it, for speculative reverie into the ineffable dimensions of life that words might miss or mask.

It is one sign of the times that some of the most prestigious literary prizes have been awarded to Frédéric Pajak's works, and it is another that the start of the 2019 literary season was marked by a flourishing of graphic biographies, most of them from major publishers. Thus, Casterman published Jean-Michel Beuriot and Philippe Richelle's *Voltaire*. Grasset issued Catel's *Le roman des Goscinny*, on the creator of Astèrix, René Goscinny, and his wife. Likewise, Dargaud did *Les Zola*, by Méliane Marcaggi and Alice Chemama, but also *Chaplin*, by David François and Laurent Seksik, and Sandrine Revel's graphic biography of Canadian painter Tom Thomson. One should also mention, among others, Eric Chabbert's *Les guerres d'Albert Einstein*, from Hachette Comics, or Jean-Yves Le Naour and Claude Plumail's *Charles de Gaulle*, from Bamboo Éditions. The publishing house Glénat Éditions also has a collection specializing in graphic biography.

Several of these graphic biographies foreground the spouses of celebrities, presenting couples like René and Gilberte Goscinny née Pollaro-Millo, or Émile and Alexandrine Zola, née Alexandrine Meley. This tendency to pay greater attention to women reflects a conscious effort in French society, including the *féminisation* of various institutions. Thus, in the salvo of publications that saluted the death of former President Jacques Chirac in September 2019, many were devoted to Bernadette Chirac, née Chodron de Courcel, who played a prominent role in the political career of her husband, and went on to be a political activist as a former first lady. *Bernadette Chirac, les secrets d'une conquête*, by Erwan L'Éléouet, followed in the steps of *Le roman des Chirac*, by Michel Feltin-Palas, while the only recent biography focused on the president himself is Jean-Luc Barré's *Ici, c'est Chirac*. Other notable examples of this trend in biographies of the wives of famous men are *Clementine Churchill*, by Philippe Alexandre and Béatrix de L'Aulnoit, and the illustrated, coffee table book *Nadia Léger: L'histoire extraordinaire d'une femme de l'ombre*, by Aymar du Chatenet et al. In the couples biography category, Stéphane Maltère's *Scott et Zelda Fitzgerald* is slightly divergent from several previous biographies of Zelda, arguing that Scott and Zelda reciprocally stimulated and then ultimately handicapped one another.

Among the many biographies devoted to women in their own right, one of the most interesting is Dominique de Saint Pern's *Edmonde*, a life of Edmonde

Charles-Roux, woman of letters and member of the Académie Goncourt, who happened to be the daughter of an ambassador and the wife of the mayor of Marseille Gaston Defferre, but who had been an active resister during the war, before working as a journalist for *Vogue* in France, of which she became editor-in-chief. Dominique de Saint Pern's *Edmonde* was awarded the Grand Prix de l'Héroïne Madame Figaro. However, in an article in *Le Monde des Livres*, Raphaëlle Leyris reports that the family of Edmonde Charles-Roux protested that "de nombreuses parties d'Edmonde sont le fruit de l'imagination de Mme de Saint Pern, et en ce sens sont bien 'du roman', mais ce livre, dans son ensemble, n'est pas 'un roman': les vrais noms de personnes réelles surabondent" [many parts of the book are the product of the imagination of Madame de Saint Pern, and therefore it suggests a novel, whereas in fact it is not a novel, for it contains a great many names and photographs of real persons]. The biographer replied: "Tout ce que j'y écris s'appuie sur des documents. Sur des choses avérées – parfois secrètes, mais avérées. Mais c'est dans la forme romanesque que je trouve ma liberté d'écriture" [Everything I write is backed by documents. Proven facts, sometimes secret, but proven. But it is in the novelistic form that I find my freedom of writing] (qtd. in Leyris). The word "romanesque" is interestingly ambiguous, for it can mean either romantic (of romance) or novelistic (of the novel). Obviously, the same debate that goes on endlessly was triggered nearly a century ago by the publication of *Ariel ou la Vie de Shelley* by André Maurois, whose influence is manifestly as crucial for Dominique de Saint Pern as it is for Dominique Bona.

In the category of biographers and life writers who are well aware of the fundamental aporia of the biographical enterprise pointed out for the umpteenth time by Quignard in *La vie n'est pas une biographie*, one should mention Brigitte Benkemoun's *Je suis le carnet de Dora Maar*. Benkemoun claims to have found the lost diary of Dora Maar in a secondhand notebook, thus suddenly reviving the threadbare literary device of the found manuscript, precisely because it is used in a nonfiction genre. Although Benkemoun does not go as far as Ruth Scurr, who writes *John Aubrey: My Own Life* in the first person, Dora Maar, like John Aubrey, slowly emerges from the writing like a figure in a connect-the-dots puzzle, as if faded by their proximity to greater stars. Dora Maar, aka Henriette Dora Markovitch, was once Picasso's mistress and an Egeria of the surrealist movement, but she was also an important photographer and painter, as became clear on the occasion of the posthumous sale of her works in 1999. Twenty years later, the Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou organized a retrospective to bring her to the attention of the wider public. "Qui était vraiment Dora Maar?" is the question asked by the catalogue of this exhibition, edited by Damarice Amao et al. Many elements of an answer are to be found in Victoria Combalià's *Dora Maar: La Femme invisible*, as well as in this original book by Brigitte Benkemoun, who was deservedly awarded the 2019 Prix Geneviève Moll de la Biographie.

There is no doubt that biography is also a potent vector of feminism in French society, in the sense that biographies devoted to great women, in growing numbers,

are gradually but assertively growing more important in the cultural landscape. Most remarkably, two new books portray the French-American feminist artist Louise Bourgeois, well-known for her sculptures, installation, prints, and knife-paintings: Marie-Laure Bernadac's *Louise Bourgeois: femme-couteau* and Jean-François Jaussaud's *Louise Bourgeois: femme maison*. Martine Planells's life of the Russian ballet dancer, *Anna Pavlova: l'incomparable*, is the inaugural release of the new publishing house Éditions de Grenelle, founded in 2017. In a more academic register, Ann Jefferson published a life of the Nouveau Roman luminary Nathalie Sarraute. Remarkably, the French translation seems to have come out one year before the English text, *Nathalie Sarraute: A Life Between*, probably for commercial reasons.

Apart from women artists, other women having played important historical or political roles have garnered the attention of biographers. Thus, for instance, Elisabeth Geffroy, Baudouin de Guillebon, and Floriane de Rivaz have brought to the wider public the exemplary life of the American activist Dorothy Day. But the most prominent example of a woman politician this year is no doubt Simone Veil, as on July 1, 2018, Veil's remains were solemnly interred in the Panthéon. She was the fifth woman ever to be admitted in the French mausoleum. Simone Veil, née Jacob, was a Jewish woman who survived transportation to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp as a teenager. A militant for the rights of women, in 1974 she was appointed minister of health for the specific purpose of bringing the Parliament to enact a law—the "loi Veil" of 1975—that legalized abortion. For this reason, Simone Veil was an icon of the defense of women's rights and also a controversial figure. She then became the first woman president of the European Parliament, returned to ministerial functions, won a seat at the Conseil Constitutionnel, and became a member of the Académie Française. That she should henceforth rest in the Panthéon confirms that the first part of the motto on the frieze of this lay temple of the Republic, "Aux Grands Hommes la Patrie reconnaissante," should be construed as a nondiscriminative "masculin générique."

This year in France has been a particularly prolific one for biography in the wider sense. In the mass of biographical works published, many seem to have been motivated by little else than the author's desire to write on a given subject, and appear therefore to address niche readerships. In this category, at least two books seem to stand out as deserving particular attention. One is *Dans le faisceau des vivants*, a biography of Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfed by his French translator Valérie Zenatti, particularly interesting because the biographer demonstrates an empathetic relationship with her subject. The other is *Daniel Pauly, un océan de combats*, by David Grémillet, director of research at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique. There is a militant aspect to this biography of the French-Canadian biologist Daniel Pauly, who was an early whistleblower denouncing the disastrous impact of global overfishing. Both these biographical works relay the commitment of personalities who devoted their lives to causes that are also dear to their biographers.

Whether biography has become in France "le genre absolu" [the absolute genre], as Dominique Bona calls it in *Mes vies secrètes*, remains arguable. But in the larger sense of life writing, that is to say including memoirs, autobiographies, and other "récits de vie," it seems indeed to have considerably risen in importance in France, not only because of its increasingly prolific production and generic diversity, but also because of the two-way overlap between biography and the novel, or fiction and nonfiction. We attend to a reciprocal change by which scientific writing awakens to its own "rationnalité fictionnelle" [fictional rationality] (Rancière 8), while concomitantly novelistic writing is perceived as a potent hermeneutic and heuristic mode. A point has been reached, in the convergent evolutions of the novel and of biography, where the gap is being bridged between what André Maurois called "biography as an art" and "biography as a science." For this reason, it may be that biography is one of the most promising fields for further development in literary science today.

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